The Legacy of Oz

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The Wizard of Oz is a world famous all-American fairy tale. It has become an essential part of the world's cultural heritage, and consequently, the story has many interpretations. However, L. Frank Baum did not intend to create a complex allegory when he sat down to write The Wizard of Oz. His intent was to tell children an enjoyable story. Although it drew on many places, Chicago's contribution makes it a part of the state's literary history.

Lyman Frank Baum was born May 15, 1856, in Chittenango, New York. He led a sheltered childhood because of a heart defect, and his only formal schooling, until he attended college at Cornell University, was the two years that he spent at a military academy when he was in his early teens.

In November 1882 he married Maud Gage, and they had their first of four children the next year. Before he wrote The Wizard of Oz, Baum tried to support his family with many different jobs. But he was unsuccessful. He started a theater chain, an axle grease company, a variety store, and a newspaper, all of which failed. In 1891, after his attempts at a store and a newspaper in the Dakota Territory had failed, he moved his family to Chicago, Illinois, the city where he found his muse.

Baum revered childhood. Possibly it was because he had lost his twice–first when his parents sent him to the Peekskill Military Academy when he was 12 years old, and then again when his father died. This resulted in the family losing all their money, and Baum was forced to sell his family's farmhouse, which had been his childhood paradise.

Therefore, in the words of Suzanne Rahn, "only by creating in his imagination a new world full of trees and lawns and flowers and gardens – a world preserved from change by magic – could he return to his childhood."

However, Baum was unsatisfied with the selection of fairy tales for children in the late 1800s. He felt that too many fairy tales were "marred by murders or cruelties, by terrifying characters, or by mawkish sentimentality, love and marriage," again, according to Rahn. These were classic characteristics of European fairy tales, as told by writers like the brothers Grimm. Therefore, he decided to write his own. In the process, he created a unique style of American fairy tales. Rahn wrote that The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was "not only the first successful full-length fantasy by an American author, but the first to create a distinctly American imaginary world." Instead of setting it in a far off land, it began in Kansas. Instead of great, strong men, the main character was a little American farm girl. The first friend she makes is a scarecrow, and the Wizard turns out to be a con man from Omaha. Baum's Oz is very American.

Indeed, when he published his first Oz book while living in Chicago in 1900, it became the year's best-selling children's book, and, though he never intended to write more than one Oz tale, he ended up writing fourteen more to please his fans. His books were so popular that other authors continued expanding the series even past his death. Playwrights adapted several of his books for the stage, and Hollywood adapted his original book for the silver screen.

The tale of Oz became an ingrained part of American culture because Baum created the first of the "three-dimensional" books, where children could step into a completely different world, like C.S. Lewis' Narnia and Tolkien's Middle Earth. This

was a whole new kind of fairy tale, a 'wonder' tale, which omitted the usual genie, dwarf, and fairy. Rahn pointed out that Baum also excluded "the horrible and bloodcurdling incident devised by the author to point to a fearsome moral to each tale."

Many authors and ideas of the time, the late 1800s, influenced Baum's creation. He praised Lewis Carroll for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, published in 1865, because children could related well to Alice, since she was not a princess or a sprite, but only an ordinary little girl. Baum held the writings of Howard Pyle, such as The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood, E. Nesbit, and Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden in high esteem also.

He shared a love for portraying mechanical devices in his stories with the classic American fairy tale writer, Frank Stockton. For instance, in The Wizard of Oz, Baum describes in detail how the Wizard builds a hot-air balloon in which Dorothy attempts to return to Kansas, and in a later book, he created Tik-Tok, the clockwork man, which some consider to be the first real robot in fiction. Stockton's stories revolve around inventions, like "The Tricycle of the Future," or "My Translataphone." In Stockton's fairytales a naïve figure travels through strange lands, and meets friendly creatures who often joined the traveling party. Baum obviously liked the format.

Chicago also influenced Baum's story. Hamlin Garland moved to Chicago around the same time that Baum did. Garland was a Chicago novelist whose famous essay, "The Emancipation of the West," written in 1893 asked American authors to reject European writing styles, and create a new midwestern style. Garland named his own harsh, but, as Rahn claimed, realistic portrayal of the Midwest "'veritism' – realism with a strong regional flavor." Baum's use of veritism is extremely evident in the first chapter

of The Wizard of Oz. He describes everything in Kansas, including the people, as grey, and Dorothy's farm as drought-stricken, leaving her family struggling for survival. However, after she lands in Oz he abandons the style.

The 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the first in America, also may have given Baum ideas for his city of Oz. Nicknamed the "White City," the architecture of the world's fair had the same neoclassic style, with the flags and banners, spires, and minarets, as the Emerald City of Oz.

Baum was also influenced by the fact that his wife, Maud, and her mother were active feminists, which may have been a contributing reason for making his main character a girl who helps three males achieve their goals along her trip, and for making Oz a matriarchal society where witches reigned over the land.

Similarly, Kansas might have become Dorothy's home state because of William Allen White's then-recent editorial "What's the Matter with Kansas?" which commented harshly on his state's poverty and hopelessness. Baum may have wanted to give these midwestern farmers hope in response to the editorial.

After Baum published the tale of Oz in 1900, and his books became famous, readers began interpreting his stories as more than just children's tales. This movement began after a man named Henry M. Littlefield published an article speculating that L. Frank Baum wrote The Wizard of Oz as an allegory for America through the eyes of the Populist Party as it entered the twentieth century. His article opened the door for everyone to start jumping to strange conclusions about what Baum 'actually meant' when he wrote The Wizard of Oz.

Littlefield, a New York high school teacher, used the story of The Wizard of Oz to teach his history class about Populism. He claimed that the scarecrow represented the farmers of the late 1800s. The scarecrow has a "terrible sense of inferiority and self-doubt," Littlefield claimed, because he is convinced that he needs brains instead of straw; a similar mindset to William Allen White's in "What's the Matter with Kansas?" However, Littlefield believes that Baum used the scarecrow, who soon reveals himself to have a shrewd and capable intellect, as a counterpoint to White's portrayal of farmers.

Littlefield wrote that the tin woodsman, on the other hand, represents the east coast factory workers. The Wicked Witch of the East has cast a spell on him to turn him into a machine, which symbolizes, according to Littlefield, how the eastern powers dehumanized honest laborers and turned them into machines, a common populist belief. According to Littlefield, the tin man became rusty and unable to work for a year to represent the state of the eastern workers during the depression of 1893.

Littlefield noted that the yellow brick road, combined with Dorothy's magic shoes, which were originally silver, not ruby as seen in the movie, represent the bimetallic standard for which the Populists campaigned. He claims that this idea is strengthened by Baum's decision to make the yellow brick road the initial way for her to get back home, when she actually had the power on her feet the whole time, she just did not know how to use it. The Populists felt the same was true of the silver standard, which they believed would greatly help the farmers across America.

Littlefield compared the lion to Populist leader William Jennings Bryan because on the outside, he appears to be powerful and dangerous. However, he is actually meek and helpless. William Jennings Bryan ran for the Presidency twice and lost both times.

Littlefield saw the wizard as "a little bumbling old man, hiding behind a façade of paper mache and noise, might be any President from Grant to McKinley. He comes straight from the fairgrounds in Omaha, Nebraska, and he symbolizes the American criterion for leadership – he is able to be everything to everybody.

However, Littlefield presents an overly simplified version of Baum's story. Baum did gain sympathy for midwestern farmers after having lived among them for several years in the Dakota Territory. He experienced the harsh treatment of the workers while living in Chicago in 1894, when the federal troops were sent to contain the Pullman Strike. He even marched for William Jennings Bryan on a few occasions. However, he limited the extent of his political activism to the later 1890s. He had nothing to do with politics either before or after those few years when America, especially Chicago, was a center of turmoil. After Bryan lost to William McKinley, Baum was never involved in politics again. Consequently, while it seems that the story fits Littlefield's interpretation, it is hard to believe that Baum would have written The Wizard of Oz with the blatant intention of making it an allegory for 1890s politics. Politics may have inspired Baum with some ideas for his book, just as the rest of his life and surroundings had. Given his life-long fascination with children and fairy tales, politics was probably the last thing on Baum's mind. His first goal was to create an entertaining children's book.

After Littlefield published his article, many other novices decided to try their hand at creating allegories for The Wizard of Oz. Today, people compare the tale to everything from a religious search for redemption and enlightenment, to a coming of age story about adolescence, and even to a young lesbian's search for her identity.

Baum most likely had none of these in mind while he wrote the story. He was writing a fairy tale to entertain children. However, these interpretations demonstrate why Baum's tale has remained so popular for more than a century. He wrote a story that speaks to many Americans in different ways, which is the mark of a master storyteller. Michael O. Riley concludes, "He demonstrates the value of working together, but distrusts large institutions. In this way, Baum's story is very American with broad appeal to American sensibilities, and these ideas have continued to have relevance" through the years. His transcending theme is that people can solve their problems if they only look inside themselves for the answer, and it is a theme that speaks to people through the generations. [From Frank Joslyn Baum and Russell P. MacFall, To Please a Child; Angelica Shirley Carpenter and Jean Shirley, L. Frank Baum, Royal Historian of Oz; Henry M. Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable of Populism," in H. Cohen, ed., The American Culture; Suzanne Rahn, The Wizard of Oz; Michael O. Riley, Oz and Beyond; Katharine M. Rogers, L. Frank Baum, Creator of Oz; The Wizard of Oz http://www.turnmeondeadman.net/oz.html (Oct. 5, 2005); and Jill Wheeler, L. Frank Baum.]